

Does Christ Know Me?

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August 21, 2022 — Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Isaiah 66.18-21; Hebrews 12.5-7, 11-13; Luke 13.22-30

Proximity Does Not Guarantee Intimacy

The Gospel for this Sunday is a warning for those who are Christians. In Luke 13.22-30, Jesus tells us that not all of those who consider themselves his friends will find the door of the kingdom of God open to them. There are people who ate and drank in Jesus' company and listened to him teach, and yet are not known by him. What more terrifying thing could Christ possibly say to those of us who are listening to his word at Mass, and eating and drinking his body and blood in the Eucharist? Are we not precisely those people being warned by this gospel, and rather harshly at that! Should our hearts not tremble at the possibility that our Lord will say to us: "I do not know where [you] are from. Depart from me, all you evildoers!" (Luke 13.27). In Matthew's gospel, Jesus issues a similar warning, but in even more cutting words. There, in Matthew 7.23, Jesus tells his would-be followers: "I never knew you" (the entire parallel passage is found in Matt 7.21-23).

But, if we think about our own experience, what Jesus is saying is actually quite understandable. There is nothing about proximity to other people that guarantees that we will know them or be known by them. Many of us do not know our neighbors, although we see them in the streets daily. Many of us do not know our co-workers, even though we eat in their company, in the lunchroom, or in the cafeteria. And, if we are honest, many people come to a point where they feel that they do not even know their own spouse or their own children. There can be painful moments where we might be tempted to speak the words of Christ even to those whom we love, saying: "I never knew you" (Matt 7.23). You only have to listen to a few popular breakup songs to hear some such words being spoken about a former lover. And indeed, the revelation that you did not actually know someone whom you thought you did often comes when that person has betrayed you or has committed an act of which you did not think him or her capable—in other words, you did not know that person previously as an evildoer (see Luke 13.27). That is what Christ calls those people to whom he has shut his door.

The Last Will Be First

So how do we prevent our relationship with Christ from coming to such a tragic end? How do we let Jesus come to know us truly? Jesus himself tells us in this same passage, exclaiming: "[B]ehold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last" (Luke 13.30). If we are used to listening to Christ's teaching and hearing him, we will know that Jesus often speaks in this way. He exhorts his disciples to be the servants of all and to receive the littlest, the child, in his name; he tells them that in order to be the greatest they must be the least (e.g. Mark 9.35, 10.32, and Luke 9.48). In other words, for Christ to know us truly, we must rely on him and trust him, we must become humble, we must become vulnerable, and we must not only let him teach in our streets, but we must listen to him. This advice is actually good for any relationship. When we rely only on ourselves, close ourselves off, and think chiefly of our own best interests, we fail in love. How much worse is this failure with respect to our relationship with God, who created all things and through whom we

must be saved? He is the one before whom we should be supremely humble, upon whom we should be supremely reliant. In the reply of those whom Christ has shut out from the kingdom, we can see this exact failure. When Christ rebukes them they do not fall upon his mercy; they do not confess their sin, their shortcomings, or their inattentiveness. Instead, they presume upon their own credentials in order to gain the kingdom, saying “*We* ate and drank in your company, and you taught in *our* streets” (Luke 13.26, emphasis mine). Indeed, Jesus warns that many who are strong cannot open the narrow door (Luke 13.34)—it is the Lord alone who holds the power to open wide and to lock tight.

Treat Hardship as Discipline

The *Letter to the Hebrews* explains part of the process through which we are humbled, that is, through the process of suffering. The epistle tells us to regard hardship as discipline because God is treating us as sons (see Heb 12.7). This saying does not mean that every suffering we endure is somehow a punishment for sins or something of that sort—although there are certainly times when we can recognize how our suffering is the direct result of sin. Rather, suffering is one of the most obvious opportunities to turn ourselves over to God. Just as a child turns to his or her parent when hurt, so also when we are suffering it becomes most apparent that we cannot rely on our own strength, that we cannot always solve our own problems, and that we are utterly dependent on God. As *Hebrews* tells us, even though at the time suffering is a cause for pain, for the patient disciple it can train us in the faith and ultimately be a cause for joy (see Heb 12.11). It is, then, ironically in our weakness that we can strengthen our drooping hands and weak knees, and through those disorienting experiences our paths become straight (see Heb 12.12-13). This reversal is, in fact, the entire pattern of discipleship in the gospels about which we have been speaking—we must become last in order to become first; we must take up our cross daily and follow Christ (see Luke 9.23); we must be crucified with Christ and no longer live so that he can live in us (see Gal 2.19). If we follow this course, how could Christ possibly turn us away from his kingdom? He will know us just as he knows himself if he lives in us and we in him.

He Will Gather All Nations

But, finally, discipline, suffering, and humility do not have the last word. Christ experienced discipline, suffering, and humility on the cross, but this path led to the resurrection, and so it will for us. We hear of just such a promise in the reading from Isaiah:

I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; they shall come and see *my* glory. *I* will place a sign among them; from them *I* will send survivors to the nations: to Tarshish, Put and Lud, Mosoch, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands which have never heard of *my* fame, or seen *my* glory; and they shall proclaim *my* glory among the nations. They shall bring all your kin from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots, in carts, upon mules and dromedaries, to Jerusalem, *my* holy mountain, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD (Isa 66.18-20, emphasis mine).

This reading has a strong resonance with the passage from today’s gospel, where Jesus says that “people will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13.30). In the reading from Isaiah, however, it is clear that this work of gathering is one done by God, and that it manifests his glory; it is not a work done by human beings to manifest our own glory. God gathers us, and we praise him for it—we cannot force open the door with any credentials of our own, even with what might seem to be spiritual credentials. This dynamic is shown precisely in the response of the nations in the reading from Isaiah, who bring sacrifice and offerings to the holy mountain. However, they do not bring the spoils of war or what they have made or built. Rather, they bring themselves and all the dispersed people of God to the house of the Lord—they bring a living sacrifice to God. So also, we must remember that whenever we offer anything to God, we offer first and foremost ourselves, wholly and fully to be known and loved by him; may he never say of us that it was otherwise. So, in the Eucharist let us not think that Christ is coming merely to our company, but we to his. Let us think not that he will teach us only in our own streets, but may we come to hear him in his own city. May we not only claim to know Christ, but also allow him to know us. May we die a death like his in order to share in his resurrection.

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For Further Reading

- Thomas Aquinas' *[Catena Aurea on Luke 13.22-30](#)*
- Timothy O'Malley, "*[The Urgency of Salvation](#)*"

In Short . . .

- *Being in proximity to someone—whether God or our neighbor—does not guarantee that we know them.*
- *To know Christ, we must surrender to him, be humble and vulnerable, and accept his discipline.*
- *This discipline often happens in suffering.*
- *Salvation is the work of God—finally, we must hand ourselves over to him.*